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Developing a Common Education Standard for Personal Support Workers in Ontario

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Abstract

In July 2014, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) released the Personal Support Worker (PSW) Program Standard. Prior to this, there were three educational standards, inconsistently applied across a multitude of education and employment settings, governed by three distinct pieces of legislation. The primary goal of the reform is to address variance in available educational options in which one can receive a certificate or diploma as a PSW. The decision emerged in response to a growing group of unregulated workers providing care for an increasingly complex long-term and community care population. The reform was achieved through a small consultation led by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC). A technical working group at the MTCU was responsible for developing the standard. The PSW Program Standard has the potential to simplify a complex educational landscape through standardization but is only the first step in addressing broader health workforce problems facing the long-term care sector in Ontario.

En juillet 2014, le Ministère de la Formation et des Collèges et Universités (MFCU) a établi le Cahier des Normes pour le Programme des Préposés aux Services de Soutien à la Personne (PSSP). Avant ce cahier trois normes existaient, appliquées de manière non uniforme à une grande variété d'établissements de formation et de travail, et gouvernées par trois textes de loi différents. Le principal objectif de la réforme est de résoudre ce problème de variabilité dans l'offre de formation délivrant un grade ou un certificat de PSSP. La décision a été prise en réponse à la croissance du nombre de préposés non régulés devant fournir des services à une population elle aussi croissante et aux besoins de plus en plus complexes, en institutions aussi bien que dans la communauté. La réforme a été promue après une courte consultation menée par le Ministère de la Santé et des Soins de Long-Terme (MSSLT). Un groupe de travail technique au MFCU a pris la responsabilité de développer le cahier des normes. Le Cahier des Normes pour les PSSP peut standardiser et donc simplifier un paysage de formation complexe mais ne représente qu'un premier pas vers la solution des problèmes généraux liés à la main d'oeuvre dans le secteur des soins de long-terme de l'Ontario.

Key Messages

- The Ontario government released a common education standard for personal support workers (PSWs) who work in a variety of long-term care settings. It identifies 14 vocational learning outcomes, essential employability skills and an optional general education requirement.
- The PSW Program Standard represents a response to long-term care health workforce issues, including a large unregulated workforce who are dealing with increasing complexity of clients within a climate of ongoing worker shortages and strained resources.
- The standard may simplify the educational landscape in Ontario and potentially improve quality of services, but it is only the first step in addressing the ongoing health workforce issues facing the long-term care sector in the province; when implemented it may prove to be a barrier for those without formal training.

Messages-clés

- *Le gouvernement de l'Ontario a établi une norme commune pour l'éducation des préposés de services de soutien à la personne (PSSP) quel que soit le type de secteur dans lequel ils travaillent. Cette norme désigne 14 objectifs d'apprentissage, des qualifications minimales pour être employé ainsi qu'un niveau potentiellement exigible d'éducation générale.*
- *Le cahier des normes pour les PSSP est une réponse aux problèmes de gestion de la main d'oeuvre dans le domaine des soins de dépendance, qui inclut une forte proportion de travailleurs non régulés qui doivent faire face à des clients de plus en plus complexes, dans un climat de sous-effectifs chroniques et de restrictions budgétaires.*
- *La norme pourra simplifier le paysage éducatif en Ontario et, éventuellement, améliorer la qualité des services, mais il ne s'agit que d'un premier pas vers la solution des problèmes de main d'oeuvre sanitaire dans le secteur de la dépendance dans la province; une fois mis en place, il peut aussi représenter un obstacle pour les travailleurs sans formation reconnue.*

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1 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE HEALTH POLICY REFORM

In July of 2014, the Ontario MTCU released a common education standard for personal support workers (PSWs). The PSW Program Standard does not outline a specific curriculum to be taught in different settings, but details 14 vocational learning outcomes, essential employability skills and an optional general education requirement. Together they comprise the essential knowledge necessary to work as a PSW in the province (MTCU 2014). Various educational programs will need to comply with the standard over the coming year. The standard was based on and replaces the three existing educational standards in Ontario. Preceding the announcement, the Ontario government conducted a series of consultations with PSWs and accepted submissions from relevant non-profit organizations.

2 HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Personal support workers (PSWs) provide support with the tasks of daily living to older people, people with disabilities, and people recovering from acute health issues in settings ranging from the home to long-term care facilities. Long-term care for diverse populations represents a growing industry with worker shortages and high turnover rates. At present, PSWs comprise the majority of the long-term care workforce, and have a distinct demographic profile with a high proportion of women, immigrants and middle-aged people (or a combination of those traits) doing these jobs (Lum, Sladek and Ying 2010).

Health sector reforms such as Ontario's Home First Program (2011) require hospitals to focus on acute care needs, shifting many patients from inpatient to community or long-term care settings. Other shifts include a social and policy preference towards less institutionalization and more home care from the 1970s onwards, as well as a growing and more complex client-base linked to the aging population. In residential long-term care homes, for example, the average age of the residents is 82.7, over 85% of residents require "mid-to-heavy care" and dementia and management of multiple conditions is very common (HPRAC 2006). A 29.7% increase in client acuity in long-term care was documented between 1992-2007 (CUPE 2013). Presently, it is estimated that approximately 49% of PSWs in Ontario work in home and community care and 36% in long-term care¹ (Lum 2013). In this strained context, there are reports of relatively stable staffing ratios despite changing client needs (Statistics Canada 2015), representing a measurable "speed-up" of PSW work (Armstrong 2013). Educational programs and governments scramble to keep up with this shifting context and growing body of workers. Establishing the PSW Program Standard is one measure that aims to both simplify the long-term care landscape and ensure workers are consistently

¹These numbers are likely skewed because they are based on an analysis of the PSW registry in 2013. At the time of analysis, it was only mandatory for public home care workers to register. However, PSWs are notoriously unaccounted for in health workforce studies, making these numbers a valuable starting point.

trained for the complex work they will do.

Training for PSWs is offered in a number of settings including public colleges, for-profit private colleges, including some online and distance programs, by adult or continuing education programs offered through Ontario school boards, as well as training provided on-the-job. The continuing education option through school boards is the most contentious route for obtaining PSW training as the number of hours and practical placements is often much lower than other settings. The idea of a “common” worker who can work in multiple long-term care and community settings resulted from an extensive consultation in 1993 seeking to consolidate unregulated health workers in Ontario, but it took until 1997 to implement (OCSA 2009). The Ontario Community Support Association (2009) believes this delay in implementation led to widening variability in the provision of PSW programs and resulting skill set of the workers.

The educational and legislative environment governing PSWs is complicated. Prior to the PSW Program Standard, there were three educational standards, one by the MTCU for programs delivered through continuing education programs in school boards, one developed by the National Association of Career Colleges in 2005 for vocational colleges, and one prepared by the Ontario Community Support Association in 1997 and generally used in public colleges. The PSW Program Standard was based on these three previous standards.

To further complicate matters, three distinct pieces of provincial legislation outline educational requirements depending on the workplace setting. The *Community Care Act* (1994) encompasses a broad range of health workers in community settings, and does not include educational guidelines since some of the workers governed by the act are professionals (e.g., physiotherapists or occupational therapists) with their own self-regulatory bodies. The *Long Term Care Act* (2007) governs publicly funded long-term care homes and requires PSWs to meet one of the three existing standards, or have three years of work experience or have training as a nurse. Finally, the *Retirement Home Act* (2010) governs private retirement homes and requires employers to ensure the adequate education of their workers, thus leaving employers to evaluate the various educational credentials and provide onsite training. It is likely that these Acts of legislation will be updated to align with the new PSW Program Standard.

In 2006 the MOHLTC considered the option of regulating PSWs and commissioned a report by the Health Professionals Regulatory Advisory Council. The report concluded that PSWs should not be regulated for reasons including lack of clear body of knowledge associated with the role, lack of consensus among varied stakeholders and potential costs of regulation for the government and employers (HPRAC 2006). Having a single educational standard could be one step in the process towards future regulation.

In 2011, the Ontario government announced and implemented a PSW registry which will be linked to the Program Standard. The goals of the registry were ambiguous and there has been vocal resistance from CUPE, who represents 27,000 PSWs or health care aides in Ontario. CUPE objects to the emphasis on employer needs over employee privacy or benefits (CUPE 2012). Other community stakeholders are supportive of the registry (Laporte and

Rudoler 2013). At present, all PSWs employed in publicly-funded home care settings are required to register, and the requirements will extend to other sectors in the coming years. Meeting the requirements of the PSW Program Standard may serve as the mechanism to unify and identify PSWs in Ontario, and perhaps, as implied by the consultation prior to the education standard, form the eligibility requirement for the registry.

3 GOALS OF THE REFORM

The primary goal of the reform is to address variation in available educational options through which one can receive a certificate or diploma as a PSW. By ensuring varied education options have similar outcomes, the reform intends to improve the quality of education in less reputable institutions, perhaps leading to the elimination of programs that cannot meet the standard. Furthermore, the reform will help create a clearer picture of the work that PSWs do and the skills they have. This information may contribute to defining the skills-mix among employees in long-term care as well as support human resources forecasting for this sector. The PSW Program Standard may also improve public perception of, and worker commitment to, these types of positions by formalizing the field.

4 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED HOW AND WHY

4.1 The issue came onto the government’s agenda

The Kingdon (2003) framework argues that three components—problems, politics and policy—come together to form a “window of opportunity” that enables issues to garner public attention. The problem in the case of the PSW educational standard is the acuity of clients in long-term care compounded with a growing and disparate unregulated workforce, creating a renewed focus on training. The politics surrounding this issue include advocacy from non-profit organizations representing both PSWs and clients who demand changes to this sector to promote higher standards and public accountability for care. There are a number of organizations that speak on the issues related to PSWs, most notably the Ontario Community Support Association and the Personal Support Network of Ontario. Unlike the introduction of the PSW Registry (Laporte and Rudoler 2013), there was widespread consensus on the idea of developing a common education standard. The policy response has been varied, from the initial question of regulation, to the still-evolving PSW registry, and now, the PSW Program Standard. The question of regulation has halted because of lack of consensus, yet the policy response is incrementally heading towards standardization of this workforce (presently without the cumbersome infrastructure required by formal regulation).

5 HOW THE REFORM WAS ACHIEVED

The implementation of the PSW Program Standard started with a consultation process led by the MOHLTC in 2012. The consultation garnered responses from the Personal Support Network of Ontario, CUPE Ontario, and the Ontario Nurses' Association. Of note, organizations representing people with disabilities who use attendant services did not participate in the public consultations. The community groups posted their consultation submissions online, all of which were in favour of establishing the standard (CUPE 2012; ONA 2012; PSNO 2012). The submissions raised concerns about how the standard will be phased in and the implications for personal support workers who are already working and may not be able to afford educational upgrades if required. CUPE Ontario (2012) regards the standard as a potential mechanism for improving the quality of education provided in for-profit colleges. The consultation also included five focus groups with PSWs across Ontario. If the Program Standard is phased in, working PSWs may appreciate the clarity around scope of practice and the acknowledgement of their work. The formal results of the consultation were not released, but the consultation led to the decision that a standard should be developed and should evolve directly from the content of the three previous standards. The MTCU was responsible for developing the standard, and the educational institutions will be responsible for implementing and evaluating the standard over the coming year (Personal Communication, Vanine Yee, MTCU, May 15, 2014). The MTCU formed a large technical working group to create the standard that included representatives from public colleges, private career colleges, school board administrators, hospitals, long-term care, community care, home care, non-profit nursing homes and relevant government departments.

6 STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Table 1 summarizes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the introduction of a common education standard for personal support workers in Ontario from different stakeholder perspectives (personal support workers and employers, government, the public, and educational institutions).

Table 1: SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The PSW Program Standard has the potential to simplify a complex educational landscape by replacing three existing standards with one. ● The standard is supported by a number of community groups, more than was evident for the introduction of the PSW registry. ● The standard may improve the skills of PSWs and their ability to provide support in various long-term care settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The consultation process for the education standard was limited and happened over a short period of time. The contributors may not be representative of the PSW workforce or employers. ● People with disabilities and Independent Living organizations did not participate in the consultation process. ● Despite the previous decision to create a general PSW category, working in long-term care settings differs greatly from working in community settings. These differences are not taken up in a fulsome way in the standard.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The PSW Program Standard may help to improve, or possibly eliminate, sub-par educational programs. ● The standard presents an opportunity to strengthen and clarify the intent of the PSW registry and serve as a mechanism to standardize this workforce. ● The standard presents an opportunity to recognize and value the work of PSWs, perhaps lowering worker turnover rates and leading to improved working conditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Program Standard may require some working PSWs to retrain or attend school if they have never done so unless the requirements are phased in. Such requirements may discourage workers from continuing in their field. ● Employers may want to maintain control over their in-service training programs which are designed to meet their specific needs and contexts.

7 CONCLUSION

In summary, the PSW Program Standard represents a policy mechanism welcomed by diverse stakeholders that will help standardize a large workforce, and hopefully better prepare workers for increasingly complicated work. The Program Standard, registry, and idea for

a common PSW program moves to standardize rather than formally regulate this sector. The program standard represents one mechanism, among many others, required to make measurable improvements in long-term and community care. The standard does not address some of the most pressing issues in these sectors related to worker-to-client ratios, pay for PSWs, or the availability of full-time positions.

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